

From previous page

principal staple, are pastures for the yaks. The Tibetans have a symbiotic relation with the yak, which is uniquely adapted to the high altitude and the bitter winters. The yak is the beast of burden in the absence of modern power equipment. It provides milk and derivative dairy products, and when old is slaughtered for meat and hides. Yaks occupy the ground floor of the houses, their body heat providing the heat for the next floor where the family lives. Even better, yak "patties" are dried by pasting them to a wall (as a decoration?) and using them thereafter as fuel.

Somehow, in this bleak countryside, the Tibetan peasants still eke out their primitive existence and practice their religion. On a nearby hill sits a shrine and there is one in the corner of the main room of every house. The home is usually shared by at least three generations. The toilet is just a hole in the floor in an outer room. As Harriet observed, nobody seems ever to wash; we never saw any laundry hanging out to dry. Along with the yak milk, butter and cheese (surprisingly tasty!), they subsist on *tsampa*, a fine barley flour blended with yak butter and often eaten uncooked. One modern convenience most homes have is electricity, since the Chinese have installed large arrays of solar panels in most villages. Not, however, enough to run a refrigerator or a microwave; just sufficient for a single light bulb and a tiny TV to hear the propaganda on the government channel. How anyone can actually live in such an inhospitable situation is a mystery to us.

We got a brief taste of what it is like by camping in a dung-strewn field at 14,000 feet altitude. Although it was September, the nighttime temperature dropped well below freezing, a harbinger of the intensely bitter Tibetan winter. Next day our vehicle chugged upward for hours through unpopulated desert to the Gyatso

La, our highest elevation at 17,300 feet. In perfect weather, a stunning view unfolded. Arrayed before us were snow-covered Himalayan peaks: Makalu, Lhotse, Mount Everest, and Cho Oyu, four of the eleven eight-thousand meter peaks in the range, along with innumerable lesser summits. The contrast between the brilliant whiteness of the mountains hovering above the drab brownness of the intervening landscape was remarkable.

The now legendary British attempts on Mount Everest in the 1920's and 1930's came from the Tibetan side, the north side (and the more difficult side). Then Tibet was "open" and Nepal on the south side was "closed". That situation reversed when the Chinese occupied Tibet, so the first successful ascent was eventually made from the south. Of course, the Chinese also climbed it from "their" side and, in the process, constructed a road of sorts to the base, which we now followed. The original base camp was located by the Rongbuk Monastery, which is now being rebuilt after its destruction in the Cultural Revolution. We traveled five miles farther in a horse cart to the Advanced Base Camp, where the enormous north face of the mountain loomed over us. One has to admire those hardy Brits of 80 years ago in their tweeds, puttees, and hob-nailed boots, who almost climbed it! Indeed, there remains an outside possibility that George Mallory and Andrew Irvine reached the summit before disappearing in 1924.

Everyone agreed that this episode was the high point of the trip. After a spectacular sunset bathed the mountain in red, we spent a crystal-clear night camped at 16,000 feet (!) in the shadow of the Rongbuk Monastery. Never had *nirvana* seemed so near. And, like Hamlet's father's, the ghosts of Mallory and Irvine wandered restlessly in the night.



Drawing by Chên Sun Campbell.